

We begin the new year on the same disappointing political note that we concluded 2011. The political process in the minds of virtually all independent observers and lots of people in both parties is that this has been an appalling year full of fabricated crises that didn't have to happen but which produced real-life consequences.

The Republican nominating process has been disappointing, revealing a mean side to both politics in the new era of the Super PACS and what happens when a party is captive to an ideological extreme. It is clear that some have failed to learn the lessons of where America fell short of the mark. Even if you're not a Republican, this is a dark cloud over the political process and we need to have two constructive, effective and responsible political parties or at least as close as we can come.

It is past time to act on the priorities that people need and support.

It really shouldn't be this hard. I would suggest that one litmus test going forward would be to look hard at issues that could be supported by both the Tea Party and the Occupy Wall Street movement. Both of these movements were responses to a shared concern that Americans were being shortchanged, that the political process was not responsive to people like them, that America is on a path that is not sustainable, and that the political process appears unable to respond in ways that meet those needs. I think that both movements are understandable and valid, and I share many of their concerns. The political process is stacked against people trying to make changes, meaning we have to make major adjustments to how we do business and how we operate.

I think the degree of overlap between these two narratives is a very encouraging sign. I think it is healthy that both found expression politically. The question will be the extent to which the people who identify with these movements can identify with each other, and with practical achievable responses to address these grievances. Going forward this year, I hope that people in Congress on both sides of the aisle will think about what these shared objectives might be.

Agricultural reform is a perfect example. We have a system that shortchanges most farmers and ranchers, is too expensive, and is tilted toward large agribusiness rather than family farms. We can do a better job to help more people while we save taxpayer money, improve the environment, and enhance the health of our children by dealing with school nutrition.

Another area of major agreement deals with how America assumes a leadership role in international aid while ensuring that we are using taxpayer dollars effectively. Two billion people do not have access to safe drinking water or adequate sanitation. The United States has the potential to dramatically enhance our effectiveness with work that we are already doing and money we are already spending. I am pleased that we have bipartisan legislation, with my friend Ted Poe as the lead Republican. Going forward, taking a tiny fraction of what we spend now on very expensive military operations that have produced only mixed results and redirecting it towards humanitarian assistance would save lives and money while improving global stability.

For years I have been working to enhance the capacity of the health care system to help people when they are most vulnerable. This has been commonly referred to as end of life, but it is not just end of life, it when people are in difficult medical circumstances in which they may lose the ability to make decisions for themselves. We need to make sure that people understand their choices ahead of time, that they are able to plan what they and their family want, and that their wishes are respected. This bipartisan concept got caught up in the “death panel” madness that was the 2009 PolitiFact “lie of the year,” but it is time to reassess it. Better advance care planning improves quality of life, is overwhelmingly supported by 90 percent of the American public, and is something that the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street ought to agree upon.

There is also a golden opportunity to come together around a collective vision of rebuilding and renewing the roads, railways, bridges and other infrastructure that are the foundation of our economic prosperity. This is happening in cities around the United States. At the state and local level people are uniting behind a vision and putting money to achieve it. This is the fastest way to revitalize the economy and our economic competitiveness and quality of life. Rebuilding and renewing America should be a bridge—not to nowhere—but to our future that brings us together.

While I strongly support efforts to try and correct the corruption of the political process that we are seeing with large sums of special interest money flooding in and savaging Republican candidates for the presidential nomination, there is another corrupting process that is taking place to which there are no constitutional barriers to remediate. That would be to clean up the redistricting process that in most states is a scandal in which politicians pick the voters so that voters have less choice in picking their politician. It is time to restore accountability to our redistricting process to ensure that our democracy runs as it is supposed to.

These are five simple steps that will save money in the long run and strengthen the economy

while revitalizing the political process and addressing the frustrations of both the Occupy Wall Street and the Tea Party. More importantly, they will enable us to harness their energy to do something good this year for the American people.